

2017

Picturing History Rack Card

Fairfield University Art Museum

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Recommended Citation

Fairfield University Art Museum, "Picturing History Rack Card" (2017). *Picturing History: Ledger Drawings of the Plains Indians - Ephemera*. 3.

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PICTURING HISTORY

Ledger Drawings of the Plains Indians

September 27 -
December 20, 2017

ART

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PICTURING HISTORY

Ledger Drawings of the Plains Indians

In the second half of the nineteenth century, artists from the Plains Indian peoples (Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho and others dwelling in the Western United States and Canada) produced an extraordinarily rich and distinctive body of drawings chronicling battles, rituals, and winsome if sometimes jarring events of everyday life. Known as Ledger Drawings because they were done on the pages of commercially produced account books, these striking images, many bearing pictographic signatures, are executed in ink, graphite, and colored pencil and watercolor. Some favor flat, stylized forms and a stark economy of means, while others show a lyrical predilection for rhythmic movement, minute descriptive and narrative detail, and dense, mosaic-like surface patterns. What all share is their makers' acute powers of observation and ambition to record and describe recognizable people, places, things and events—to eloquently picture and record history as it transpired.

Ledger Drawings are virtually unknown other than to a small group of specialists and cognoscenti, and with rare exceptions they have been studied foremost as anthropological and ethnographic documents rather than as artistic creations. Yet the medium—pencil and watercolor on paper—as well as the function and absorbing subject matter align these works with the centuries-long European tradition of drawing “stories,” whether taken from the Bible, history, mythology, or everyday life. Following European models, such picture chronicles became part of artistic practice on the other side of the Atlantic, the American continent providing a more proximate and immediate context for these resonant images by Native American artists. Featuring some fifty Ledger Drawings, *Picturing History* presents these evocative works as graphic masterpieces warranting a place in the long and rich history of drawing.

Generous support for the exhibition and related programs is provided by Donald Ellis Gallery, New York.

Photo credit: Cheyenne Attacking a Pawnee Camp (Ledger Drawing), ca. 1875-78. Attributed to Howling Wolf (Southern Cheyenne, Central Plains). Watercolor, graphite and colored pencil on paper; 8 ½ x 11 ¼ inches. Private collection, courtesy of Donald Ellis Gallery, New York